IRISES

I was looking out of the French windows onto the garden one afternoon when I was sixteen and staring dreamily at some Iris leaves. It must have been early in the year because the flowers were not yet in bloom but it was the leaves that fascinated me. "They look like the clashing swords of barbarian tribes," I thought to myself. "If I can come up with a phrase like that, I bet I could be a poet." "I want to be a poet," I said out loud, firmly and confidently. As I said this my mother came in the breakfast room door. "What did you say?" she asked."Oh, nothing," I replied, too embarrassed to tell her and afraid she would make fun of me. Not that she would have; my father or grandmother might have laughed or warned me that I'd be poor all my life if that's what I wanted to be; my mother would probably have smiled ruefully and said "Well, if that's what you think you'd like to be, be a poet."

Around this time coincidentally, I took one of those national career (what do you want to be when you grow up) tests. After I had filled it in, the overseer, sent to administer the test by the local school board, handed me the results: first choice: poet, second: musician, third: explorer, forth: painter. "It's all very consistent" said the man, "except for the explorer." "But," — and I have always been proud of my response — "but," I said, "don't you see that explorer and poet are the same thing?" He stared at me blankly, not understanding, as if to say, "What a strange boy!"

I have always been amazed that "poet" was even one of the categories they came up with. On the one hand, I was pleased with the result of the test which obviously was accurate, on the other, disappointed that my ambition and intelligence didn't register something more practical like lawyer or schoolteacher or social worker. Besides, I had only written two poems in my life: one about a sailboat crossing the Atlantic to America, the other about a petrified forest in Arizona. It's interesting that both poems were about the States — as if I had a subconscious notion that I would end up here.

Irises are stately, exotic flowers which have a Medieval look about them like ladies of the manor, delicate, tall, dressed in velvet. My favorites are the tiny, wild, yellow flags which spring up like golden shouts of joy from the murkiest ditches, the gloomiest of lake shores. I identify with the yellow flags. I am like them: I too sprang up — colorful, brilliant — from a place you'd never think to look — a tiny, forlorn English village — I wave in the breeze, I attract attention, I shout for joy, beautiful in my isolation.

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